DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 393 FL 012 846

AUTHOR Spencer, D. H.
TITLE The Reality of Written Examinations and Realism in Preparing for Them.
PUB DATE Dec 81
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (16th, London, England, December 18-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); *Error Analysis (Language); Higher Education; Language Tests; Language Usage; Paragraph Composition; Secondary Education; *Second Language Instruction; Vocabulary Skills; Writing Exercises; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Written examinations are considered to be more searching than oral ones; they are less subject to chance because they give more time to the student for reflection, and they do not favor one type of learner over another. This view is taken even though language is speech before it is writing. While there may be a need for a complementary oral examination, the "old-fashioned" kind of written examination still provides the best indication of a candidate's language ability and knowledge. Teachers can help their students succeed in written language examinations by instructing them in word usage and language styles, noting their errors and tracing the origin of the errors, giving practice in correcting these errors, and then writing correct English sentences. Teachers might also give students practice in writing under examination conditions. For example, they might be assigned an examination type essay for homework and a week or so later be required to write on the same topic in class. Another exercise might be to correct typical errors in a paragraph constructed by the teacher. Generally speaking, assigned exercises such as daily journal keeping in the foreign language are good writing practice. (AMH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED214393

FL013846

THE REALITY OF WRITTEN EXAMINATIONS AND REALISM IN PREPARING FOR THEM

*(A paper read at the XVIth International Conference of IATEFL, London, December, 1981)

In front of the reality that language is clearly speech before it is marks on paper - and I include in speech the internal monologue - and of the consequent emphasis on Direct Method Teaching, it may be wondered why so many language examinations are based on written instead of on spoken answers. Why, particularly in the British system of education, written examinations carry so much more weight than oral ones? Has this anything to do with the national character - the stereotyped picture of the Englishman as being rather shy, reticent and tongue-tied? Perhaps. But upon reflection I think one must admit that written examinations are more searching than oral ones; they are less subject to chance because they give time for reflection, for recollecting (if not in Wordsworthian tranquillity) what one has studied and learnt over a number of years. There is a greater likelihood not only of finding the right answer, but also of phrasing it in the right language. Moreover there is usually an element of choice, so that one can choose to write about what one knows best, and is not forced into the position of having to find a quick answer to a question, probably selected by a method more appropriate to a lottery, on an aspect of the subject which, for one reason or another, one knows less than the examiner thinks one should.

In these respects the written examination is fairer, and gives a truer indication of a candidate's ability, than the oral examination. The oral examination favours the extrovert candidate, who is self-assured and good at social intercourse. The shy and socially nervous candidate is clearly at a disadvantage. And with both types of candidate the oral examiner himself is at a disadvantage, because he has to make up his mind quickly, and put down a mark, before the next candidate appears in front of him. To some extent his marking is bound to be impressionistic - there is too much room for errors of judgement. The very nature of the task makes an oral examiner more fallible than a written examiner. I will not add that an oral examiner can be influenced by a candidate's personal appearance, or dress or bad manners, because a written examiner can be equally influenced by ugly or barely legible handwriting.

Of course, both teachers and examiners have long been aware of these problems, and various attempts have been made to find compromise solutions, such as the multiple-choice test. But multiple-choice and other forms of short answer testing also have their drawbacks: the element of chance, for example, the fact that they sometimes verge more on tests of pure intelligence than of language, and the fact that they are concerned more with the passive, receptive skills than the active, productive ones. All in all, and without in any way denying the need for some kind of complementary oral examination, it does seem to me that the written examination, and the old-fashioned kind at that, still provides the best indication

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D. H. Spencer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

of a candidate's all-round language ability and knowledge in depth. And that being so I would like now to try and suggest ways in which teachers can best help their students to prepare for this kind of examination, quite apart from doing the necessary and obviuos spade-work on grammar and lexis.

Writing is generally a good deal more formal than speaking. So unless one is constructing a dialogue one has to be careful not to mix styles; not to use informal and colloquial words and expressions in what is intended to be a piece of straightforward narrative or expository prose. So don't let your students write, for example:

"The guy in the shop said it was O.K."

And there are gradations in this sort of thing. "Bloke" would be as bad as "guy", "chap" might be rather better, "bird" would definitely be worse. In an essay on violence in large cities one would need, I suppose, to use the unpleasant neologism "mugging", but should not say that the unfortunate victim of a mugging "kicked the bucket". This kind of literary solecism is all too common. It shows, presumably, that the student reads modern English fiction, which is much to his credit; but it also shows that he is not aware of how everyday language shades into colloquialism, and colloquialism into slang.

A word in a particular context may be wrong for another reason - that although it lies within the same area of meaning, and doesn't alter the sense, it nevertheless does not conform to standard usage. I quote:

"Scarcely had I cycled half way to school than I drove into a nail and my bicycle got a flat tyre."

There's nothing grammatically wrong with this sentence. Indeed, it is rather well constructed. It just happens that we don't drive a bicycle. One can understand why the student used "into" instead of "over", but the circumstances in which one might legitimately use "into" would be exceptional. I suppose the kind of error which results in using "drive" for "ride" goes back to the old business of learning new words in context, not in isolation. Ride a bicycle (and a horse), drive a car, fly a plane etc.

Sometimes the wrong word is chosen because it looks like the right word, and perhaps, in a more logical language than English, would actually be the right word. The best exmple of this is the difference between "economic" and "economical", over which many intelligent students come to grief. When they write, for example:

"Some kinds of central heating are more economic than others".

it looks right, and if said over to oneself may even sound right, but the correct adjective is nevertheless "economical".

There are other pairs of words which students find difficult to sort out in their minds: ignore and neglect, waste and spend, wait and expect, rob and steal, lose and loose, actual and present, remark and notice, source and resource, assist

and attend,advantage and profit. I think all teachers at intermediate level and above should make their own collection of points of this kind and give practice in correct usage.

I used the expression "pints of this kind" in the last sentence deliberately,because it leads on to an error which is surprisingly frequent but difficult to categorise. This is the use of "sort of" and "kind of",or "sorts of" and "kinds of",with a following noun,which also may be either singular or plural. The close juxtaposition of two nouns leads to a confusion of concord,especially when the second or main noun is uncountable,or is used in an uncountable sense. Consider:

"I eat very different kind of food".

The indefinite article is missing. Presumably the student knows that food by itself:"I eat very different food" would not need it,but has not woken up to the fact that by inserting "kind of" he has introduced a countable noun that does need the article. Or take this example,which is rather similar:

"He accused me of every kinds of thing".

Sometimes this kind of sentence,or these kinds of sentences,or these kinds of sentence (!) are not obviously wrong,but read clumsily:

"My interests are almost any kinds of sports".

A native speaker would almost certainly say either "any kinds of sport" or "any kind of sport". And another example:

"I like this kind of studies".

There is little difference in this case between study,which is uncountable, and studies. I suppose you could say,paradoxically,that studies is uncountable, too,and accept the sentence I've quoted as correct. Indeed,you could probably argue that all four variants of this sentence are correct,and have an identical meaning. Nevertheless,a native speaker would be more likely,I feel,to write either "this kind of study" or "these kinds of studies".

Another common kind of error arises when students attempt to use the impersonal pronoun "one". They do not follow through consistently,so we get sentences like this:

"When one goes abroad,he needs a passport."

It also seems to be difficult for students to understand that "you" is more frequently used in an impersonal sense than "one"; they obviously do not have the native speaker's instinct for recognising when "you" does not mean "yourself". In the same way they often fail to realise when the ostensibly male pronouns and possessive adjectives are intended to include also the female sex.

One would not have thought that referring to the time in writing was particularly difficult, but like so many other apparently simple things in English it offers its own pitfalls. I have come across:

"I'll meet you at 4 p.m. o'clock" - and even:

"I'll meet you at 1600 hours p.m."

There are places where the letters a.m. and p.m., like the word o'clock, cannot be used. Has anyone noticed, incidentally, that although we cannot use "o'clock" when minutes are involved, the same restriction does not apply to the word "hours" in the 24-hour system?

A fair percentage of errors can of course be ascribed to mother-tongue interference, to more or less conscious translation from the student's own language. There's no time to give a range of examples, so I'll just content myself with a couple from French. The student who wrote:

"The country can't export oil because it hasn't got enough for its proper needs."

was clearly thinking of the French word "propre" meaning "own". He then began the next sentence with "By consequence" instead of "In consequence". Prepositional usage is a great stumbling block for speakers of Romance languages. We find, for example, that an irate wife throws plates to her husband instead of at him. (No doubt the result is the same!) A kind of transference of associations can be at work here, too. A French student who has learnt that "à mon avis" is "in my opinion" is very likely to write "in my point of view" instead of "from my point of view". A teacher who does not have a good working knowledge of his students' mother-tongue is at something of a disadvantage here, although of course if he finds that several students often make the same mistake he should at least suspect the reason, and try to find out about the L1 usage to see if that is to blame.

What strikes one very forcibly when marking written examinations is the large number of elementary mistakes that are made; not only in spelling and punctuation but also across the whole range of grammatical structures. You find that candidates make adjectives plural, mis-spell very common words like "which", omit or insert the definite and indefinite articles apparently at random, put a comma between the subject and the verb, misplace capital letters, and so on. They are the kind of mistakes that simply should not be made. Does one ascribe them to examination nerves, to haste, to sheer carelessness or to what? They cannot really be due to plain ignorance. I am inclined to think myself that teachers may be largely to blame for this state of affairs, because they don't give their students enough practice in writing English, and probably no practice at all in writing under examination conditions, that is, within a strict time limit. Nor do they appear to give them any help with punctuation, which is one

of the few aspects of English that, because it is logical and not grammatical, is relatively simple and straightforward. They don't force their students to revise their work before handing it in. But all written work needs to be read over carefully, once it is completed, to check for slips of the pen. Even when writing in the mother-tongue this is surely something that one normally does; just think how much more necessary it is when writing in a foreign language.

A good way of ensuring that part-time students get enough practice in writing, especially in the last six months or so before the examination, is to persuade them to keep a kind of diary; and to write a paragraph or two at home every single day. It need not take more than ten or fifteen minutes, but it keeps their hand in, it helps them to remember. As the proverb says, practice makes perfect, and a little practice every day is more effective than two or three hours once a week. It doesn't matter what they write about, it can be anything from the day's events to the foreign policy of Ruritania; nor is it necessary for them to have their work corrected by the teacher, unless they ask for this to be done. I have found that it is enough if they just make the effort to write a few sentences of normal English every day, without haste, and using a dictionary and reference grammar when they feel the need to do so. I believe that evry student who is at all serious about the examination he has entered for will see the sense of this, and make the small effort required.

What else can be done to help examination candidates avoid the kind of error, especially the less obvious kind, of which I have mainly been talking? Most students who sit for these examinations are young, and unless they are lucky enough to be growing up in a bilingual environment will not have had time to acquire the kind of feeling for language which only comes after years of use. Of course they will make mistakes, but they shouldn't make so many that the examiner has no option but to fail them. Here are two pre-examination exercises which are worth trying. Set an examination-type essay for homework, correct it, explain the mistakes in some detail, and then, a few days later, make the class write the same essay again, in class, with a time limit. They won't have to think about what they are going to write - they should remember that - and will therefore have more time to concentrate on writing correctly, or at least on avoiding the mistakes they made the first time - even if they now make new ones!

The second exercise demands preparation by the teacher. Try to write a ahort essay, or part of an essay, which deliberately includes a fixed number of mistakes, of the kind most of the class usually make. Then give each student a copy and ask him to find the mistakes and produce a correct version for each

of them. The deliberate mistakes can be all of the same kind - all involving points of grammar,for instance,or of punctuation,or they can be mixed. But if the latter it might be as well to warn the class that there are,say,six mistakes of structure,three of word order,two of punctuation,and one involving the wrong use of a single word. I would not ordinarily include spelling mistakes;one is,after all,not supposed to show students passages of incorrect English. But in these particular circumstances I think it is justified,to sharpen their perception of the kind of mistakes they are all,at one time or another,liable to make,and hopefully to enable them to avoid these same mistakes where it matters most - in a written examination.

D.H.Spencer December,1981.